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SUBJECT: UNITED RUSSIA MUSCLES ITS WAY INTO STAVROPOL KRAY

REF: MOSCOW 1431

Classified By: A/DCM Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (d).

Summary  
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11. (C) In Stavropol Kray, United Russia has reasserted itself politically and administratively in the aftermath of the March 2007 elections, in which A Just Russia scored an upset victory. United Russia has stripped the unpopular governor of his party membership, replaced the independent Kray Elections Commissioner with a United Russia lawyer, and has allegedly engaged in harassment of other parties. A Just Russia has been set adrift by the changes -- especially by the decision of Putin to head the United Russia national ticket -- and the head of their regional candidate list, Stavropol Mayor Dmitriy Kuzmin, is reportedly "abroad" until after the December 2 elections. End summary.

United Russia Reasserts Itself  
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12. (C) In Stavropol Kray, United Russia is seeking to avenge the sole defeat suffered in the March 11 regional duma elections (reftel). The United Russia leadership blamed Governor Chernogorov for the defeat and stripped him of his party membership. Boris Obolenets, local leader of the Union of Right Forces (SPS), told us that the Kremlin had decided to strip Chernogorov of his membership but to keep him on as Governor. "They (in the Kremlin) could not remove Chernogorov after the election because there would have been pressure to replace him with a member of A Just Russia, since they had just done so well in the polls. After December 2, United Russia will claim victory in Stavropol Kray and will surely replace the governor with one of their own."

13. (C) United Russia is pulling out all the stops to win in Stavropol on December 2 and has distanced itself from local politicians. Nationally popular Minister of Emergency Situations Sergey Shoigu, who has no connection to Stavropol Kray, was selected to head the party's regional list of candidates. The Minister's plane was at the airport during our visit, and Shoigu was campaigning throughout Stavropol Kray without local members of United Russia. Vladimir Trukhachev, the Deputy Head of United Russia in Stavropol Kray (and also the Rector of the Stavropol State Agricultural University), told us that the Stavropol branch of United Russia had foreseen that Chernogorov (a recent defector from the KPRF) would drag down United Russia at the polls, but the party's central committee had unwisely overruled it and kept the Governor on the March ballot. Now that he has been kicked out of the party, he claimed, the people would be able to fully voice their support for the plans of United Russia without being distracted by "negative personalities." The city was thoroughly covered with United Russia billboards ("Putin's Plan is Russia's Victory" and "We believe in Russia! We Believe in Ourselves!"). In the center we saw

only one LDPR billboard and no signs at all for A Just Russia.

#### A Walk in the Woods with the Deposed Elections Commissioner

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¶4. (C) United Russia also played a major role in overhauling the membership of the Kray Election Commission (KEC). Viktor Limanov, the former commissioner who had held the position for 14 years, told us that "United Russia has turned the KEC into an arm of the party." During the summer, the Governor and Kray Duma (which was still dominated by United Russia) named seven members each to the KEC, resulting in 10 from United Russia, and one each from the KPRF, LDPR, SPS, and A Just Russia. Limanov noted that his fate paralleled that of Federal Central Election Commission, where Vladimir Churov had replaced Aleksandr Veshnyakov, and that elections commissions in other regions - notably in Karbadino-Balkaria and Kaliningrad - had been similarly rebuilt. The new Commissioner, Boris Dyakonov, refused to meet with us without the permission of the Central Election Commission in Moscow. Sergey Yerin, a representative of the Stavropol Kray Administration, explained that Dyakonov was new to his job and was still checking everything with Moscow.

¶5. (C) Limanov said that during the last election campaign, his commission found several violations committed by United Russia, including factory managers demanding that their employees vote for United Russia. Limanov went to the Governor (who was then head of the regional party list) with evidence and told him that if these activities did not cease, the elections commission would take action against United Russia in court. The governor denied that the violations were taking place, and implied that Limanov could lose his job if he persisted. Although Limanov was willing to talk

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freely with us ("I'm retired now, so what can they do to me?") he was obviously concerned, and asked that we meet with him in the middle of a local park.

#### KPRF vs. A Just Russia

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¶6. (C) Viktor Goncharev, leader of the Communist Party (KPPF) fraction in the regional duma and head of the regional KPRF candidate list, told us that Putin's decision to head the United Russia national list would result in an additional three percent of the vote for the KPRF. "This decision completely invalidated A Just Russia's slogans about being 'for Putin but against United Russia'." He expects that voters from A Just Russia will be divided between supporters of Putin and supporters of the ideals of social justice. A Just Russia, he said, knows that they cannot fight United Russia, "so they have headed onto our turf." As an example, he gave us samples of A Just Russia's campaign materials that featured the slogan "We are from the USSR!" with the initials formed by "Union of Supporters of Spravedlivaya Rossiya (A Just Russia)." Goncharev said that the KPRF goal in Stavropol Kray was 20 percent, but they needed at a minimum 12 percent to get local members into the State Duma.

¶7. (C) A Just Russia's seven-member local slate is headed by Mayor Kuzmin, and includes his brother Aleksandr and a possibly-related Alla Kuzmina. Goncharev said that the KEC had already warned A Just Russia about violating campaign laws (for allegedly "bribing" voters with bottled water and other campaign give-aways), and that another violation could result in their removal from regional ballot. Obolonets and Goncharev both noted that Mayor Kuzmin had reportedly left the region "for abroad" and was not expected back before the election. We were unable to verify this with representatives of A Just Russia, who cited the press of their campaign activities in refusing to meet with us.

#### Claims of United Russia Harassment

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18. (C) SPS's Obolonets claimed that United Russia and its supporters now had free rein to play dirty tricks. During the March elections, he said, SPS had no problems campaigning, but now SPS and other parties were being targeted. He told us that the SPS offices had been spray painted and that someone had thrown tin cans full of foul-smelling liquid through its office windows. While we were meeting, he received a call from his assistant that their office windows had been smashed overnight. Obolonets said that other parties were also being harassed. For example, A Just Russia had been the target of a smear campaign posters alleging that many members of the party had AIDS, and that A Just Russia would force employers to hire people with AIDS as part of its "fairness" policy. Obolonets claimed that both the vandalism and the smear campaign were orchestrated by United Russia and carried out by its youth groups Molodaya Gvardiya and Nashi. Limanov said that he had heard of some of these problems and that the KEC was turning a blind eye to them. "They see A Just Russia handing out bottled water, but they miss United Russia throwing bricks through windows."

Comment

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19. (C) The climate in Stavropol has changed for the worse since we last visited. With the replacement of Limanov and his associates, who had prided themselves on running fair and open elections, the playing field now seems tilted towards United Russia. United Russia is focusing a large amount of resources in the region in an attempt to win big. By sending Shoigu -- who has been in Kommersant's list of the top ten most influential people in Russia for the past six years -- to head the regional list, United Russia is showing that it has little faith in the local leaders but that it is not willing to write off any region that might spoil its claim to unanimous support throughout the country.

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